

JAC NewsBreak

VITAL NEWS & RESEARCH INFORMATION FOR JAC LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

January 23, 2009

On my mind this month...



Barbara Bluhm-Kaul

Two days after his historic and electrifying inauguration, President Obama named former Senator George J. Mitchell as

his Middle East envoy, signaling that the new administration will be fully engaged and waste no time in pursuing Middle East peace. This work will be done under the leadership of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. I couldn't be more pleased.

I am proud of JAC's record of strong support for the Senate campaigns of these two fine public servants. Hillary Clinton is well known to all of you. George Mitchell may not be. I have had the pleasure of knowing him since the early days of JAC, when he was a little known candidate from Maine. JAC saw in him the international leader that he was to become. As a senator and then majority leader, his voting record on Israel-related issues was flawless, and he often led the way on pro-Israel measures.

Together we can communicate our support for the President's Middle East initiatives and for pro-choice and pro-separation policies by attending the JAC Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, March 10th-11th. When we show up in full force on Capitol Hill, we make a strong statement that there are progressive Jews who care about Israel. Your presence is needed and I hope you will join me.

In spite of these difficult times, I am optimistic. We have a bold new administration ready to implement an ambitious agenda with the help of a like-minded Congressional majority. Happy new year to us all!

JAC NEWSbreak, for JAC Leadership Circle, is a monthly publication of JAC PAC.
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Israel

On his first morning as President of the United States, Barack Obama made telephone calls to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarek and Jordanian King Abdullah II. This was a strong signal to these leaders in the Middle East that the United States plans to be intimately involved in peace negotiations in the region, in direct contrast to the past administration. Former Senator George Mitchell has been appointed as special envoy for Middle East peace between Israel and its neighbors, former Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross will serve as special envoy to Iran and Richard Holbrooke will serve as special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan. There could be additional appointments before you receive this Newsbreak.

The IDF completed its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip on January 21, putting an official end to Operation Cast Lead against Hamas. Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak defended the IDF operation. "We're not happy about the destruction in the Gaza Strip and we regret the loss of civilian lives... Hamas determined the battlefield and its operatives were the targets for IDF attacks. Their operations from within densely populated areas, schools, hospitals and mosques endangered the residents of Gaza." President Obama said that it is an absolute necessity that the smuggling of arms by Hamas be halted. And European foreign ministers meeting in Brussels told Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni that their nations would help in the prevention of smuggling with the precondition that crossing points between Israel and the Gaza Strip be opened. However, and not a good omen, by late on the 21st, there were reports that the tunnel trade never stopped and is back in business. Speaking at the State Department on January 22, President Obama detailed his position. "Let me be clear. America is committed to Israel's security. And we will always support

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United States

CHOICE

January 22 marked the 36th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion. The next day President Obama reversed the "Mexico City policy," known also as the "global gag rule." It prohibits U.S. foreign aid assistance to international family planning groups that perform or promote abortion with their own funds. The policy was named for the conference at which it was drafted in 1984 and was first instituted by President Ronald Reagan in 1984. President Clinton rescinded the policy on January 22, 1993, but it was reinstated by President George W. Bush on January 22, 2001. In anticipation of the repeal, Rep. Diane DeGette (D-CO), co-chair of the Congressional Pro-Choice Caucus, said, "It would be huge. By the U.S. restricting women's rights to reproductive planning internationally, it really destroys their lives. Because they can't control the size of their family, that affects their use of resources and food and child nutrition and so many other things. The way to increase the stability in Third World countries, frankly, is for sensible family planning." (NPR 1/22/09)

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that President Obama is considering lifting Bush administration restrictions on federally funded stem cell research, but that might be done through legislation. "We're still examining what things we'll do through executive order," Obama said. "But, I like the idea of the American people's representatives expressing their views on an issue like this."

Reps. Diane DeGette and Louise Slaughter (D-NY) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) will introduce legislation to increase family planning funding, end insurance discrimination against women and improve emergency contraception awareness. Statistics show that half of pregnancies in the United States are unintended and half of those end in abortion.

Research & Races

Four new senators have been appointed to replace Barack Obama (IL), Joseph Biden (DE), Hillary Clinton (NY), and Ken Salazar (CO), now members of the Administration. Two of the appointees have been sworn in and two will probably be sworn in next week. All four seats will be up in 2010. The winners of the seats in Colorado, Delaware, and Illinois will serve for full six-year terms. In New York, the election in 2010 is a special election required when an appointment is made to fill a vacant seat. The winner of that special election then serves until the unexpired term is completed in 2012.

Colorado - Replacing now-Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar is Michael Bennet, who is leaving his job as Superintendent of Denver Public Schools. Prior to becoming superintendent, Bennet served for two years as the

Chief of Staff to Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper. He had been Managing Director of the Anchultz Investment Company. Bennet has a law degree from Yale, where he was the Editor-in-Chief of the Law Journal.

Delaware - Ted Kaufman served for nineteen years as Senator Biden's chief of staff before becoming a co-chair of Biden's vice-presidential transition team. Kaufman does not intend to run for re-election in 2010. "I want to make clear that I am very comfortable with retiring after 2 years...I don't think Delaware's appointed Senator should spend the next two years running for office."

Illinois - Roland Burris fills the seat held by President Barack Obama. Burris was Comptroller of Illinois from 1979 to 1991 and Attorney General

from 1991-1995. He was the first African American to be elected to statewide office in Illinois. He ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic nomination for U.S. Senate in 1984. He has a law degree from Howard University School of Law.

New York - Kirsten Gillibrand currently represents New York's upstate 20th Congressional District. She was first elected in 2006. Gillibrand previously served as Special Counsel to the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development during the Clinton Administration. She is a member of the Blue Dog Coalition, opposes gun control and supports extending tax cuts for middle class families. Gillibrand received her law degree from UCLA.

New York will need to hold a special election to fill Gillibrand's House seat.

Separation of Religion and State

On January 21, U.S. District Judge Robert Gettleman ruled that the Illinois' law requiring a moment of silence in public schools across the state is unconstitutional. The ruling came in a law suit designed to bar schools from enforcing the Illinois Silent Reflection and Student Prayer Act. The suit was

filed by talk show host Rob Sherman, an outspoken atheist, and his daughter, Dawn, a high school student. As passed by the Illinois General Assembly, the law allows students to reflect on the day's activities rather than pray if that is their choice. Defenders of the law argue that the law does not force

religion on anyone. Judge Gettleman disagreed and said the law is a thinly disguised effort to bring religion into the schools. "The plain language of the statute, therefore, suggests and intent to force the introduction of the concept of prayer into the schools." (MSNBC.com 1/22/09)

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Israel's right to defend itself against legitimate threats. To be a genuine party to peace, the quartet has made it clear that Hamas must meet clear conditions: recognize Israel's right to exist; renounce violence; and abide by past agreements. Going forward, the outline for a durable cease-fire is clear: Hamas must end its rocket fire; Israel will complete the withdrawal of its forces from Gaza; the United States and our partners will support a credible anti-smuggling and interdiction regime, so that Hamas cannot rearm." Obama then expressed his concern for the loss of Palestinian and Israeli life and the suffering of Palestinian civilians and promised United States support to the long term reconstruction of Gaza "provided to and guided by the Palestinian Authority." (*Washington Post* 1/22/09)

According to the Washington Times, Israel's Gaza offensive has created fractures in the Israeli-Turkish alliance and strengthened relations between

Ankara and Tehran. "This will seriously damage Turkish-U.S. relations on a long-term basis," said Graham Fuller, a former CIA officer and author of books on Iran and Turkey. "Israel will get no free ride from Ankara anymore."

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was offended when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert failed to alert him in advance of Israel's plans to launch an offensive in response to Hamas' rocket attacks. After the start of the offensive on December 27, Mr. Erdogan infuriated the Israeli government by siding strongly with the Palestinians. On January 16, Mr. Erdogan went even further, demanding that Israel be expelled from the United Nations, "How is such a country, which totally ignores and does not implement resolutions of the U.N. Security Council, allowed to enter through the gates of the U.N.?" Meanwhile, Iranian officials have been frequent visitors to Ankara in the past few weeks, and

Turkey and Iran have enjoyed increasingly close trade and energy ties in recent years. There has also been an increase in anti-Semitic protests in Turkey in the last few weeks, including anti-Jewish propaganda posters in Istanbul, the defacing of a synagogue in Ismir and protesters outside the Israeli consulate in Istanbul. U.S. Jewish groups, including the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, B'nai Brith International and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, have written to Prime Minister Erdogan expressing their concern - "Our Jewish friends in Turkey feel besieged and threatened. A connection is clearly perceived between the inflammatory denunciation of Israel by Turkish officials and the rise of anti-Semitism." Erdogan has said a number of times that "criticism of Israel should not spill over into anti-Semitism, which is a 'crime against humanity.'" (*Daily Alert* 1/23/09)